UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/ICEF/1997/P/L.15
18 December 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND
Executive Board
Second regular session 1997
18-19 March 1997
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*

FOR INFORMATION

SUMMARY OF MID-TERM REVIEWS AND MAJOR EVALUATIONS OF COUNTRY PROGRAMMES

South Asia

SUMMARY

The present report was prepared in response to Executive Board decision 1995/8 (E/ICEF/1995/9/Rev.1) which requested the secretariat to submit to the Board a summary of the outcome of mid-term reviews and major country programme evaluations, specifying, inter alia, the results achieved, lessons learned and the need for any adjustment in the country programme. The Board is to comment on the reports and provide guidance to the secretariat, if necessary. The mid-term reviews and major country programme evaluations described in the present report were conducted during 1996.

MID-TERM REVIEW

1. Maldives held the only mid-term review (MTR) conducted in South Asia in 1996. It is the smallest country in the region, with its population dispersed across more than 1,200 islands. Despite a growing national income related largely to the tourist industry, difficult conditions and significant inequalities persist in the situation of children and women. For example, UNICEF-supported studies have identified the need to strengthen referral and transportation services for high-risk pregnancies. Small-bore sewer systems must be expanded. Parental education is required on the adverse consequences of one of the world's highest divorce rates and the pressure put on girls to marry young rather than complete secondary education.

* E/ICEF/1997/8.

2. The present focus of UNICEF support is to help the Government to maintain achievements and improve service quality, especially in the health and education sectors. The programme includes efforts to increase knowledge of the situation of children and women, as well as strong advocacy efforts. UNICEF works closely with the limited group of other United Nations agencies and bilateral donors operating in the country.

3. The Maldives' achievements over the past few years include a primary school enrolment rate of almost 100 per cent, with a 15 per cent drop-out rate, and over 90 per cent coverage of the expanded programme on immunization. Maldives is on the verge of being declared polio-free. There has been a drop by one half in the incidence of diarrhoeal disease in the past five years. Malnutrition among children under five years of age decreased by 15 per cent between 1981 and 1995.

4. Implementation and monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been fostered through a communication network. The MTR discussed national reporting on the situation of children and on elements needed to implement the Convention. The MTR recommended a further shift of the programme from a needs-based to a rights-based approach, including an increased focus on universality of coverage. Future plans also include supporting a more participatory approach to health education and nutrition, which is expected to decrease levels of malnutrition.

5. The rates of budget expenditure for 1994 and 1995 were 97 and 98 per cent, respectively. Supplies represent just under 30 per cent of total financial assistance. Cash advances outstanding for over nine months during the same years were only 3 and 1.5 per cent, respectively, of the annual ceiling. Problems exist in mobilizing supplementary funds, with only $181,400 in supplementary funds received for the present programme period. However, government expenditures on education and health have reached their highest levels ever, now commanding one third of the national budget.

6. The programme has contributed to a significant expansion of capacity for education and other social services. Eight womens' centres have been established. The number of teachers has risen with the training of 853 primary teachers (425 of whom are women) at the Institute of Teachers' Education. An additional 442 teachers (of whom 316 are women) were trained in atoll-based training programmes. Early childhood development has become part of the primary education improvement plan, with 92 teachers trained to date. A range of educational materials for teachers and children has been developed at the Education Development Centre. The deployment of female health workers and traditional birth attendants to all islands has contributed to better control of communicable diseases, especially diarrhoea, malaria and measles, through advocacy and community awareness. This work is facilitated by a high degree of support by the population and capacity to participate in programmes and projects, including financially. There is an 80 per cent rate of private sector delivery of pharmaceutical needs. The UNICEF-supported revolving fund for the marketing and distribution of water tanks has been particularly successful, with 80 per cent of actual costs recovered in two years. Complete self-financing is expected within three years.

MAJOR EVALUATIONS

7. A cornerstone of the UNICEF strategy for improving the quality and usefulness of evaluations, globally and in the region, has been an effort to reduce the numbers of small-scale evaluative activities that have not been sufficiently substantive to make a difference to programme efficiency and effectiveness. As a result of this shift, the number of evaluations continued to decline in South Asia in 1996 as compared to previous years. Those that have taken place and those currently being planned are expected to be able to identify more strongly than in the past programme impact, coverage, efficiency and effectiveness. For example, in the context of the regional priority on reducing malnutrition among young children, a review of evaluations of nutrition programmes in the region has found virtually no evaluations over the past 10 years, sponsored by any development agency, that have conclusively demonstrated programme impact and linked impact with an analysis of programme efficiency. Taking stock of these lessons, UNICEF in Sri Lanka is paying particular attention to plans for evaluating its participatory nutrition improvement programme.

8. In the past, a main weakness of UNICEF evaluations has been a basic inability to describe programme impact and analyse cost issues. For this reason, the majority of UNICEF support for activities of an evaluative nature in the region during 1996 concentrated on monitoring systems. In Nepal and Pakistan, following completion of broad-range surveys designed to report on achievement of goals for children and women, the programmes have supported community-based surveillance processes that have examined programme impact, coverage and costs, both to households and to Government, of priority problems. For example, in both Nepal and Pakistan, there have been in-depth assessments of the low quality of primary education, with solutions proposed. Some of these results are reported below. Household and community-level assessments were followed by analysis at national, regional and community levels to discuss results and stimulate a stronger dialogue on finding solutions to the problem. In Nepal, this monitoring process is carried out under the authority of the National Planning Commission. Findings in the education sector have differed significantly from figures reported via standard school-based information systems, which has helped to spur discussion at the national level. In light of the regional trends towards decentralization of government responsibilities and increased support for community-based programmes, UNICEF will strengthen its support for building capacity for assessment and analysis of the situation of children and women at subnational levels, through both short-and longer-term training.

9. During 1996, key themes for evaluation in the region included the performance of universal salt iodization (USI), credit schemes and primary education programmes.

Universal salt iodization programme evaluations

10. Bhutan, India and Pakistan have carried out evaluations to improve USI efforts. The overall objectives of these exercises have been to: (a) assess the quantity and quality of iodized salt production against requirements; (b) review the system for monitoring iodized salt at production and consumption levels; and (c) analyse the resource needs and roles of different departments, institutions and agencies in achieving USI, and so make recommendations on future programme inputs. The three exercises are being conducted over a two-year period, and only initial results can be reported at the end of 1996.

11. In Bhutan, monitoring of salt iodization at community level, as well as of the iodine content of salt at the salt iodization plant, was found not to be proceeding as planned. As a result, iodine levels in some areas were sometimes found to be inadequate. The mid-decade goal for USI was reached none the less, although the level of salt adequately iodized at household level had decreased from 95 per cent in 1992 to 85 per cent in 1996. The total goitre rate was measured at 14 per cent, lower than in 1992, although the decline was less than the target of 50 per cent reduction. No iodine deficiency was found as measured by the standard median urinary iodine excretion. Future improvements in the programme require continued technical strengthening as well as stronger public commitment. Recommendations have been made in each of these areas, including steps to improve public understanding of the issue.

12. The Pakistan and India evaluations are more complex since the challenges for achieving USI are greater in those countries than in Bhutan. The first phase of these evaluations has consisted of discussions with the Government, salt producers and transporters, retailers and consumers. Subsequent phases include detailed surveys and costing exercises. A USI survey in Pakistan found salt iodization to be at acceptable levels in only about 20 per cent of households. The India household survey will be carried out in 1997 with a sample drawn from three salt-producing states and six net salt-consuming states to understand better the dynamics of production, distribution, sale and consumption. The India evaluation has been supported in part by the Government of Canada's Micronutrient Initiative. Results to date have shown that iodization plants are operating with installed iodization capacity of 8 million tons, and that iodized salt production increased from 2.8 million tons in 1992 to 3.7 million tons in 1995. Current production is estimated at 4 million tons, as against the estimated USI target of 5.6 million tons. Refined iodized salt now represents approximately 25 per cent of all salt available in poly-packs, the principal form purchased by consumers. Production of crystal salt, which is often subject to loss of iodate due to washing, has stopped. Recommended future actions include a general strengthening of the programme in southern states, setting up check points for salt transported by road at state entry points and streamlining movement by rail.

13. The most prominent realization in both countries so far has been of the need for more stringent legal measures and their enforcement. In India, the regulations on salt producers and transporters have been found to need strengthening. In Pakistan, discussions have focused on the development of a new national programme to control iodine deficiency disorders to give visibility and emphasize government ownership, legislation and monitoring of salt quality. The evaluation has also pointed to the need for a new strategy to inform the public of the consequences of iodine deficiency, and why the Government places a priority on iodized salt. The establishment of a steering committee has proved to be successful in India for government ownership of both process and results owing to efforts in capacity-building, self-assessment and use of findings. This approach is time-consuming, however, because of the involvement of many actors in different departments at different levels. Finally, the evaluations have revealed the need to improve laboratory practices and develop a computerized management information system.

Credit programme evaluations

14. Credit programmes for women are supported by UNICEF in a number of South Asian countries as a means of capacity-building and income enhancement. In the context of a major international focus on credit schemes in 1996, UNICEF carried

out two significant evaluations of this work. In Pakistan, the Baluchistan Credit Scheme is one of the provincial women's development initiatives which has been operating since 1989. The credit scheme was initiated in conjunction with the Social Welfare Department and aimed to promote self-help and solidarity by organizing working women in cooperatives. Credit was to be made available to poor women who would not qualify for commercial credit to help improve their production capacity and develop local networks. The evaluation found that after five years of operation, the programme had, in fact, increased the visibility and social acceptability of women's productive work as such, not only as part of their regular household duties. However, only 1,061 of the planned 2,000 recipients had obtained credit, and the loan fund had revolved in only 18 of the 36 centres. Several key reasons were identified, including co-optation of loans by influential people in the area, the lack or irregularity of payments because of investment failure, and a perception that the funds should be treated as grants rather than loans. The evaluation found that the women who benefited from the programme had skills, but needed a resource base to break the poverty cycle. Those who took loans without adequate preparation tended not to be successful.

15. The scheme was found to have high costs relative to loan turnover, with service delivery expenditures of some 2,400 rupees in relation to the average loan amount of 7,500 rupees, calling for either increased loans, reduced expenses or a realistic interest rate/service charge. The Social Welfare Department was chosen as a partner because it already had outreach activities to communities. However, the Department, and many recipients, considered its role to be more as a deliverer of services, and it had little background for commercial ventures. Other partners were not fully effective in forming functioning cooperative groups. Baseline data were not available to determine the overall impact of the programme. The evaluation made a number of recommendations to improve sustainability, particularly to strengthen the organizational base of the programme, and to move to a more market-based lending approach with the local cooperatives.

16. The project for production credit for rural women in Nepal has operated for over 10 years, with support from the Government and a number of donor agencies. An evaluation was carried out to guide future UNICEF support to the project and related women's development activities. The project had begun with considerable success, but as it expanded it lost effectiveness, in part because of bureaucratic structures and procedures. Repayment rates for loans have been high (over 90 per cent according to a 1991 study by the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank) and more women than before have had access to credit under the project. Sustainability of the income-gaining activities was found to be limited, however, as the majority of loan recipients either depended on new lending to continue or were trapped in debt because of failure of high-risk loan investments. (Repayment rates and the number of loan cycles entered into are thus, on their own, misleading measures of the success of credit programmes.) Factors found to influence the long-term capacity for loan repayment were the size of landholdings, the degree of cooperation of the husband and the frequency of interaction and supervision of the project field staff, notably the women district officers.

17. The project appears to have influenced the formation of local groups as intended, although the household survey used to evaluate group formation has yet to be analysed. Before the newly formed project groups can obtain credit, they

must work together in other activities to develop mutual trust and to prevent the formation of groups that focus solely on credit. The women district officers are to give basic training to strengthen group dynamics and empowerment, and in future they must function more as advocates, rather than as implementors. Insecure career prospects, lack of autonomy in solving local problems and a limited sense of project ownership have led to declining motivation among the project's field cadre. These problems are rooted at the larger level of bureaucracy since, in part because of the project's gender identification, it has been implemented in isolation from government technical and extension agencies and support for national sectoral policies. Major recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the project are for better communication between line departments of local government; between the project federation and the Government; between the community-level institutions and project groups; and between women development sections at the district level and UNICEF field offices.

Primary education programme evaluations

18. Recent education evaluations in several countries, including Bangladesh and Nepal, have indicated the limited effectiveness of primary education programmes. In Bangladesh, an assessment of a new primary school curriculum showed that the newly developed curriculum had an insignificant impact on childrens' school performance. Studying 6,000 children from 10 districts, the assessment found that the average score obtained by class-four children for all subjects combined, using the new materials, was 49 per cent, only 2 per cent better than the average score of class-five children who were educated with the old materials. At the same time, 95 per cent of the teachers and 75 per cent of the parents considered the new curriculum an improvement. In explaining these results, the evaluation reported that teachers were not prepared to use the new materials appropriately and that the new educational materials were in short supply. Childrens' performance differed significantly between government and registered non-government schools, indicating inadequate facilities and low quality of teaching in the latter group. A significant gender gap in performance was revealed - 4 per cent overall and 7 per cent in math. Other findings pointed to the effects of the socio-economic environment on children's performance. A relatively consistent pattern in performance by district was also found, indicating the importance of area-specific factors. The results are being translated into actions to improve the curriculum and its use, teachers' performance and mean achievement of basic competencies, as defined by the Government of Bangladesh, for an 11-year-old child. Even more important than changing the curriculum is improving ways of teaching and learning. To this effect, multiple ways of teaching and learning are being introduced in primary schools.

19. Similarly in Nepal, significant differences were found in many indicators of educational performance (primary school enrolment, girls' education and literacy rates, as well as nutrition) across the country's economic zones and within districts. A round of the Nepal multiple indicator survey (NMIS) was carried out as part of a broad assessment of the national basic and primary education programme (BPEP). BPEP, supported by the World Bank, UNICEF and other donors, was designed to address a range of key educational problems: low school enrolment rates, especially for girls; high drop-out and repetition rates; poor performance by students; low quality of instruction, instructional materials and school management; and underutilization of community resources. NMIS results

showed, at most, generally modest impacts of BPEP in these different respects. Drop-out rates were found to be essentially the same (2 per cent for boys and 4 per cent for girls) in BPEP and non-BPEP areas, and school enrolment was only slightly higher in BPEP areas. However, repetition rates were found to be lower at BPEP sites (19 versus 24 per cent for boys and 20 versus 27 per cent for girls). Attendance by both boys and girls was about 10-15 per cent higher in BPEP areas. The gender gap in rates of enrolment, retention and completion is undiminished at some 20 per cent, requiring strengthened communication and mobilization activities. The overall difference made by BPEP is difficult to judge, however, owing to a lack of data prior to the BPEP intervention.

20. It was found that for classes one and two, neither the physical facilities nor the level of teacher training had a major impact on enrolment, retention or drop-out rates. Perhaps the single most important factor in improving educational performance was the presence of female teachers. Significant recommendations of the evaluation are thus for expansion and quality improvement of teachers' in-service training and increased recruitment of female teachers. Because drop-out and repetition rates are highest for the first two grades, the expansion of pre-primary education is also expected to improve educational performance. A companion cost-effectiveness study showed that the nationwide implementation of pre-primary classes would generate greater savings, in terms of reduced wastage in class one, than the actual costs of pre-primary school.

21. The evaluations in each of the above areas indicate an emphasis on operational relevance and the generation of lessons to improve programme effectiveness and efficiency. The USI reviews illustrate a formative evaluation approach in a multi-country programme with strong international support. The credit scheme evaluations were carried out to strengthen the slow process of capacity-building and empowerment of women at community level. The education evaluations were designed to assist national authorities and UNICEF to focus efforts and resources on large-scale, national programmes. In each of these areas, a key need is to strengthen capacities for monitoring to obtain regular, basic data, particularly at disaggregated levels. Evaluations in the region are becoming more substantive, addressing priority programmes and issues of "process" - community empowerment, gender aspects and service quality - as well as outcome. It is expected that these trends will continue, with further attention to such region-wide initiatives as USI and national immunization days.